

The 10 Commandments of Public Speaking

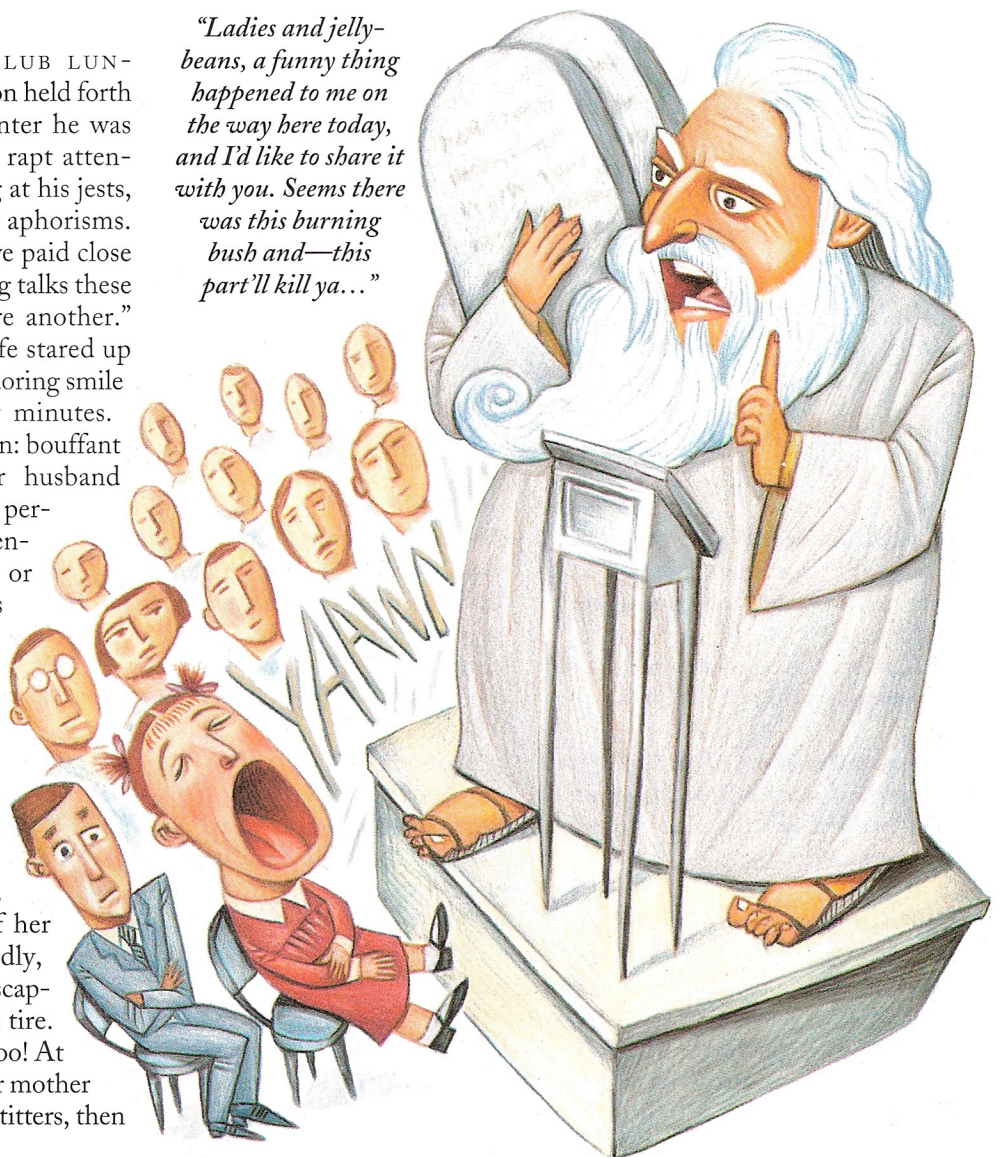
BY REID BUCKLEY

Get on, get off, and never follow the dog act

AT A FLOSSY COUNTRY CLUB LUNCHEON, the silver-thatched tycoon held forth on the benefits of the arts center he was funding. People listened with rapt attention, or so it seemed—tittering at his jests, nodding heads solemnly at his aphorisms. “O.K.,” I chided myself, “you’ve paid close attention to 5,000 mostly boring talks these past ten years, you can endure another.” Wasn’t easy. The speaker’s wife stared up at her spouse, the rictus of an adoring smile planted on her face. Twenty minutes. (She brought to mind Pat Nixon: bouffant hair, white linen suit.) Her husband wound at very long last into his peroration...at which time my attention was captivated by the 13- or 14-year-old daughter, who was seated at a round table below the dais, in front of me.

She was struggling with a yawn. She resisted, but the corners of her mouth were as though tugged away from her pretty little teeth by iron grapples. She could not suppress the eruption, which was prodigious. It tripled the cubic volume of her mouth. And it came forth loudly, like 60 pounds of air pressure escaping the inner tube of a tractor’s tire. Aaaaawwwwoooooeeeeeeeeooooo! At which—this was amazing!—her mother burst into laughter...provoking titters, then

“Ladies and jelly-beans, a funny thing happened to me on the way here today, and I’d like to share it with you. Seems there was this burning bush and—this part’ll kill ya...”



Illustrations by Glynis Sweeney



howls, from everybody in the room. Except the great man, who glared at wife and daughter in crimson-cheeked fury.

A nifty little epiphany, and for our purposes, a good place to start.

Commandment 1: *Don't bring your 13-year-old along to your speech unless you have pre-bribed her not to yawn.* Here are nine others:

Commandment 2: *Never begin a speech with a joke.* Not even if it's funny. Nothing betrays the amateur faster. Get to your point directly. By all means, lace your text with humor—but let it boil up out of the content, uncanned.

Commandment 3: *Shun the conditional tense.* It's weak, and nothing conduces more certainly to giving the impression that one is a windbag. "I would suggest." "I would submit to you." Worse, it might lead you to say, "Would that it were...." Stick to the present tense.

Commandment 4: *Spurn rhetorical flourishes.* "I should like to begin by...." Just begin—don't hem and haw. "I submit to you." What that usually means is you don't have a clue as to what you're saying.

As for, "Let me share with you...." Please, don't. When one hears that awful ingratiation, one knows that one is in for a slathering of sentimen-

tal or a revelation of grueling intimacy. One can "share" a blanket, split peas, a cookie, a seat or even knowledge. One may share a Kleenex, in a pinch. One cannot share pain ("Have some, it's on me!"), an experience, an emotion, an idea, an intellectual state, an opinion, good taste or bad.

Commandment 5: *Avoid vulgar, with-it, faddish in-phrases like "P.C."* Do you remember "the bottom line?" There was a time when one could read nothing without bumping up against it. "The bottom line" belongs in an accountant's statement, or possibly in reference to a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue.


"Getting down to the nitty-gritty," "politically correct," "PLU" ("People Like Us"): such reductions, when fresh, can be okay. But they must be *fresh*. The moment they bubble up in weekly news magazines or on TV talk shows, they are used up.

Commandment 6(a): *Do not quote anything from anyone unless you have read the book.* Or are thoroughly familiar with the author's work and have thought long and hard about it. Oh, sure: there are juicy quotations that can be irresistible and safe to use. But served-up opinions, aphorisms, *pensées justes* outside the area of one's competence sound somehow as though they have been microwaved into the text for show, not truly marinated in the speaker's mind. As a rule, any quotation longer than 50 words is a mistake. Twenty-five words is better by half. But even brief, pointed quotations can be an addiction. The repetitive thud-thud-thud of clever ironies dulls the audience's minds.

Commandment 6(b): *Never indulge in an unlikely allusion, either.* Count on this: almost nobody who quotes Plato has read Plato. Ronald Reagan had a stable of shrewd speechwriters, but memory winces at his greeting of the Pope at the Miami airport, back in 1987.

It was nightfall. The weary pontiff was met by Reagan at the foot of the

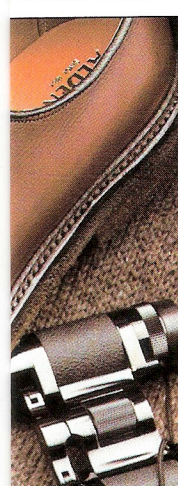
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jet's gangway. Our hero's welcoming remarks were larded with references to scholastic philosophy that fitted him as gracefully as a fighter-pilot's cap fits Bill Clinton. Rarely did Ronald Reagan permit himself to look or sound foolish, but the half-smile that played on John Paul's lips as, with bowed head, he submitted to those uncharacteristically sententious presidential words, gave the game away: he knew that Ronald Reagan had not read a word of Thomas Aquinas, and so did everybody else, on the tarmac and watching the news.

One cringes when captains of industry quote Ovid, or when fundraisers recite Zen-Buddhist koans. A speaker should avoid dressing himself in borrowed clothes, for fear some brat in the audience (maybe even a beloved daughter) will reveal—with a yawn—that he is wearing none of his own.

On the other hand,

Commandment 7: *Do not depend on the slightest gleam of intelligence that you imagine you detect in your audience.* This is like relying on the gleam of compassion one detects in the eye of an IRS auditor. You may be addressing a bevy of Nobel laureates at the Cosmos Club: before they quit the auditorium, they have forgotten what you said, so quit appealing to their intelligence. Everything you say should be exquisitely wrought, but what you must aim at is the gut: implanting in the audience a good feeling about you. "Sound fellow! I agree with everything he said. Whatever it was." This is the genius of Bill Clinton's stump speeches, their warm and fuzzy sincerity, stunningly resisting analysis, but making their point with the public just the same. All the same,

Commandment 8: *Never fail to treat every member of your audience as the juror over your conscience, for whom you will exert your best effort proving the validity and justice of your case.* Humility of spirit is the vital attribute of the speaker. Conceit is his enemy. The speaker who disrespects his audience is a fool.

Commandment 9: *Never accept a booking in Pennsylvania.* Years ago, after a booking in Harrisburg, my path crossed that of the late Russell Kirk, who had lectured at a nearby college. Over lunch, he said to me, "Were you aware that Mark Twain dreaded talks in the Commonwealth as much as you and I do? Why, one night he was addressing a rural York County audience that never cracked a smile. One farmer in particular unsettled him, a tall, gaunt, lean fellow in his mid-50s, with a lantern jaw and gnarled fists, who stared grimly at him out of steel-gray eyes. Twain swore to himself, 'I'm going to crack that man's shell if it's the last thing I do.' With this object fervently in mind, he aimed the final 20 minutes of his wittiest remarks at the fellow...only to see them bounce off that impervious brow and fall shattering to the floor. Twain had done his darnedest, but he had failed.


"Afterwards," Russell Kirk went on, "at the apple cider and doughnuts reception, the farmer stomped up to Twain, saying, 'Mr. Clemens, sir, that speech you gave was so funny I could hardly keep myself from bustin' out laughing.'"

Commandment 10: *Never speak after George Will.* Or before him, for that matter. It's like going before or after a stand-up comedian crossed with Samuel Johnson. George Will has been accused of delivering a litany of erudite one-liners, but that charge is in the order of postulating a surfeit of caviar. (No such thing.)

Never make the mistake of trying to compete with a phenomenon. Ask to be excused. Cough up blood. If that's impractical, courage: keep your remarks brief, low-key and utterly unrelated to what the star has said or is going to say. If his talk is political, stun the audience with your grand-aunt's recipe for pecan pie. Then wait for a better night. •

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